

Sketch

Volume 59, Number 1

1993

Article 45

Problems

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PROBLEMS

Emily the bride is crying in the far corner of the Holiday Inn ballroom. Her mascara runs down her face in black streaks, and I'm worried it will get on the dress, which (I hear) was frightfully expensive. The groom has an arm around her, and one of the bridesmaids, also in tears, is offering a wadded napkin. The rest of the bridal party, except for Otto, has run out to the lobby after Gretchen, the Maid of Honor.

At the other end of the ballroom, across dozens of round tables peopled with silent, astonished guests, Otto stands next to the uncut wedding cake (two-tiered, banana nut, real flowers—\$2.00 a person), holding his fifth vodka tonic in a thick hand. He has loosened his bow tie, and it hangs down his wet chest like a gloomy snake. He looks at his watch, kicks a piece of broken glass at his feet.

My God, says somebody behind me. It's Mrs. Fiorini, whose daughter Rose I took to senior prom hundreds of years ago. Rose got married just last week herself, to a pre-med student from Georgia. I hear it was a beautiful wedding. Mrs. Fiorini had just been showing me the pictures a little while ago. Rose looked gorgeous, even better than she looked at the prom. They were honeymooning in Mexico, Mrs. Fiorini said.

Now she asks, What happened? as if she hasn't seen the whole thing. My mouth is full of cheddar cubes so I

can't answer. Anyway, I don't know what I would tell her.

Emily's father pulls away from his distressed wife and walks toward Otto. His face is red, his mouth frozen and small. He is a gigantic Greek, and has a temper, and I know he will kill Otto for ruining his daughter's wedding, which has been in planning for two years and which, if Emily's father had his way, would have excluded Otto entirely. He's going to punch Otto out in front of two hundred guests, in front of his daughter, his family, the groom's family. He's going to bloody up my best friend, and make a bad scene worse. But Otto doesn't care. I can see that by the way he watches the ice melt in his drink. He is oblivious to the giant walking toward him, or to the faces focused on him and the calamity about to befall him. I envy him, I think.

Otto took Gretchen to the senior prom. We all remember that. She wore a hoop skirt and carried a plastic bouquet that lit up. It was impossible for her to sit down, and she spent the whole time dancing—sort of floating, really—or walking around. I think she threw a drink at him that night, too. Otto knows just how to set her off. This time, it looks bad. I have never seen Gretchen this mad, or heard them yell so loudly.

Instead of socking him, the bride's father takes Otto's arm and says something to him, trying to catch his eye. But Otto looks down and shakes his head. They turn and walk away from the tables together, as the guests begin

to murmur.

You know, I say to Mrs. Fiorini, I'm glad I'm not in love. She looks at me and I smile.

That's not love, she says as I walk away. That's problems.

In the grand lobby Gretchen stands crying under the monstrous chandelier, surrounded by most of the bridal party. I squeeze in among them and take her hand.

What happened, I say.

I don't want to talk about it, she says, I just want to be alone for a while. She walks outside, leaving us behind.

I take the elevator to the fifth floor, and key into my room. For a minute I lie on the double bed. My heart is pounding as if I've run up the stairs. After a while I stand up and look out the window. Gretchen is still out there, in the parking lot. She's sitting on a car, a purple satin hood ornament for a Cadillac. I take the elevator down and walk out to her.

If it would make you feel better, I say, I'll buy you an electric bouquet. Oh god, she says. But she smiles.

Personally, I say, I think you look cute in a hoop skirt.

We sit there, on the hood of the Cadillac, and as the heat fills my skin and her laugh echoes inside me I pray that Otto or someone will come out and save me.

Jose Llerena